

“Climate Justice Movements: A Work in Progress”

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Video clip: <http://yesmagazine.org/planet/were-not-done-yet>: a remarkable interview with Tom Smith, a young British climate activist who explains what is at stake for him and many other climate campaigners.

There are indications that the second decade of the twenty-first century may witness an explosion of global democratic demands and participation in movements focused on climate change, a situation that raises a number of questions particularly suited for social scientific investigation. We need to know a great deal more, for example, about the politics of this emergent global movement, how its members see the causes and remedies of climate change, what enhances and what limits its ability to build effective networks, and the extent of their capacity to compel governments to negotiate in good faith for a climate treaty that corresponds to the vast scale of the problem: the United Nations Development Programme’s *Human Development Report: Fighting Climate Change* has argued this is “the defining human development issue of our generation” (UNDP 2007).

At present, there are dozens of social movements and NGOs, large and small, playing important roles in the movement, pressing demands for national and global commitments to limit greenhouse gases. Some of the most visible of these include Climate Justice Now!, Climate Justice Action, 350.org, and Friends of the Earth International. Many of their members were present in the huge marches and demonstrations in the streets of Copenhagen at the December 2009 COP15 meeting (as was I), and some also operated inside the main halls and UN negotiating rooms of the

Bella Center, while even more participated in the movement's ten-day alternative Klimaforum09, with its full schedule of workshops and speakers. The official COP15 meeting thus drew global climate activists together in large numbers in a powerful way (Turner 2010, Fisher 2010a, 13 table 1), Simons and Tonak 2010, Bond 2010, 2011).

At present, the international climate negotiations are at an impasse. Existing market-based programs such as carbon cap and trade are failing to constrain the steady increase of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and thus to many, a new more stringent and enforceable treaty is the only plausible solution. But to get a scientifically adequate and socially just treaty, governments who do not want to vote for it, or whose short-term interests and economic elites are not served by signing, will need to be persuaded and/or possibly forced by their own national and international constituents. This impasse opens an arena for increased participation of the social movements, fluid networks, coalitions, NGOs, and grassroots communities of global civil society that collectively form this emergent global climate justice movement, and which we believe just may be the crucial missing piece in the immensely important and dramatic struggle for a climate treaty adequate to the scope of the problem.

Aims

We have set ourselves the tasks of documenting the origins and development of these movements, investigating their merging into broader networks, and explaining the degree of their influence (if any) on the negotiating positions of individual nations and, by extension, on the international negotiations.

The research questions we seek to answer include:

How are climate activists, organizations and movements producing new political cultures of opposition to carbon-driven industrialization, to the capture of climate governance by economic elites, and to climate change skepticism?

How well do the multiplicity of movements and organizations manage their internal differences, incorporate multiple constituencies, and thus make effective collective action possible or not?

How do these multi-level networks and movements interact with elected governments and influence the treaty process?

The existing literature on climate activism

In the past two years, the social science of climate change has been gathering momentum. Like cultural and economic globalization before it – and it is the quintessential global issue – climate change and environmental issues in general are making their ways into social science curricula and research programs across the United States. But according to John Urry, “the physical scientists and economists have got there first and dominate climate change analyses” --

this will not come as news to my BREN audience today! (Urry 2011, 2-3). What needs to be done, he explains, is research that places society at the center of climate change analysis. Urry's own work opens up a vista for the analysis of climate justice movements (especially with its concept of the "carbon-military-industrial complex"), yet still largely leaves out the movements and their political cultures. The same is true of Anthony Giddens's 2009 work on the politics of climate change, which explicitly devalues the efforts of the world's Green parties as too radical to be effective. Our work, on the other hand, proposes to bring society back in by taking an historical, ethnographic, and comparative approach to climate activists, their organizations, their roles in civil society and the international climate negotiations, and the social and ecological conditions which are driving their creation of new political cultures of climate-related resistance.

Theoretical perspectives

In previous work we have developed a set of original conceptual tools for the study of culture and agency, and their role in shaping social movements and thus society, including "political cultures of opposition and resistance," which looks at the complex interplay of material socioeconomic conditions, emotions, historical memory, formal ideology, and informal idioms in the formation of revolutionary social movements (Foran 1997, Reed and Foran 2002, Foran 2005, Foran in progress), and the notion of "modern social imaginaries," which helps conceptualize the core institutional transformations of modernity, which have given us the system of markets, constitutional democratic forms of government, and the rights and freedoms of ordinary members of what we may call global civil society (Taylor 2004, Widick 2009, 2009a, in progress).

The concept of "political cultures of opposition and resistance" attempts to explain how people make political sense of the social settings that constrict and enable their lives, in ways that sometimes contribute to the creation of effective social movements. Here you can refer to diagram 1 in the handout.

Diagram 1: The making of political cultures of opposition (dotted lines indicate relationships that are more loosely connected)

When these take hold in a large enough social group or wider society, often through the work of some kind of radical/progressive *organization or network*, a social movement can gain more committed followers and thus be more able to take effective action. The forging of a strong and vibrant political culture of opposition is thus a collective accomplishment, carried through by the actions of many people.

Our conceptual framework may be put in the form of hypotheses in a preliminary way as follows [see the handout]:

1. There is a global, modern, carbon-driven capitalist social imaginary.

In the late twentieth century, the systematic collapse of socialist societies ushered in a

period of capitalist triumphalism accompanied by the rise of globalization in the 1990s. This socioeconomic and cultural transformation has been characterized ideologically by the rise of neoliberalism juxtaposed with a human rights revolution, economically by market liberalization (for example free trade agreements), and ecologically by the deleterious climate effects of what we might call the carbon-industrial complex (cf. Urry's "carbon military-industrial complex" 2011). We thus speak of a global, modern, carbon-driven capitalist social imaginary to highlight the dependency of all national societies on carbon-releasing fuels.

2. The emergent global modern carbon-fueled social imaginary has been challenged, successively, by

- v twentieth-century revolutionary political cultures of opposition, typically aimed at dictatorships and colonial governments, involving hierarchical leadership of guerilla armies inspired by ideals of socialism, nationalism, and democracy (Foran 2005), followed by
- v twenty-first century global justice movement political cultures, typically aimed at governments and international institutions, involving looser, less hierarchical networks following non-violent strategies and aiming at rights for indigenous people, women, workers, and against militarism and economic and economic inequality (Foran 2009), and now
- v a variety of global *climate justice* cultures of opposition aimed at a comprehensive climate treaty and the economic, social, and political changes that such a treaty would require, involving local and global networks of activists and organizations inspired by ideals of ecological socialisms, participatory democratic institutions, and post-carbon societies.

Only the latter two have singled out the carbon component of the globalizing, modern social imaginary for opposition, and only the last elevates the carbon-industrial complex to the central figure of opposition.

3. At present the field of climate struggle is dominated by three large divisions (see table 1):

- v Carbon-driven globalism, embodied in and expressed by transnational capitalists and corporations, China, the U.S., and other resource-rich industrialized nations, including Australia and Canada;
- v Global environmental reformism, embodied in and expressed by mainstream climate activists, much of the climate science community, most of the large environmental NGOs, the European Union (led by France, Germany, and the

U.K., and supported by Iceland), and India, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico;

- v Global climate justice activism, embodied in and expressed by progressive transnational NGOs such as Friends of the Earth International; global climate justice movements, including 350.org; local/national movements such as Climate Camp in the U.K. and Acción Ecológica in Ecuador; and such states as Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela, and the Maldives.

Table 1: *The struggle over climate change: major divisions in the field of struggle*

	Climate Justice Complex	Environmental Reform	Carbon Industrial
<i>Actors States</i>	Global climate justice movement Bolivia, Iceland, Maldives Australia	UNFCCC conferences, IPCC European Union, Brazil, India	Transnational corporations China, U.S., Canada,
<i>Doctrine Analysis and transnational interests</i>	Rights of Mother Earth Dramatic and deep action is needed immediately	Renew Kyoto Protocol Anthropogenic climate change requires global cooperation	Neoliberalism Treaty will be too costly, harms
<i>Systemic goals Approach Solution</i>	Ecological post-capitalism Tipping points Climate treaty for a <1.5 degree C. increase REDD)	Global governance with capitalism Mainstream climate science Climate treaty for a <2 degree C. increase	Elite capitalist polyarchy Denial of science Market mechanisms (e.g. Cap and Trade,
<i>Intellectuals tanks</i>	Hansen, McKibben et al.	Giddens	Koch Industries think
<i>NGO actors Politics</i>	FOEI, 350.org, et al. Radical/anti-capitalist	Mainstream environmental NGOs Democratic/reformist	Right-wing NGOs Neoliberal/capitalist
<i>Popular culture Fear</i>	Films <i>Avatar</i> , <i>The Age of Stupid</i>	Gore film, <i>An Inconvenient Truth</i>	Crichton novel <i>State of</i>
<i>Key texts Environmentalist</i>	Cochabamba Declaration	IPCC reports	<i>The Skeptical</i>
<i>Slogan</i>	“System change, not climate change”	“Follow the science”	“There is no alternative”

We are going to study the climate justice section of this struggle over the ecological future. As mentioned earlier, we will begin with a study of some of the most prominent groups of activists in this movement:

At the global level, we have chosen several of the most visible, active, and effective movement organizations and networks as the first sample of cases for the study.

Climate Justice Now! – <http://www.climate-justice-now.org> – is “a network of organisations and movements from across the globe committed to the fight for social, ecological and gender justice.” Founded at the COP14 in Bali in 2007, Climate Justice Now! was very active in organizing major events at both Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancún in 2010, and has plans to continue its activism at Durban in 2011 and beyond.

350.org, founded in 2007 by author Bill McKibben, 350.org takes its name from climate

scientist James Hansen, whose research has concluded that returning the Earth's atmosphere to 350 parts per million (ppm) of CO₂ is necessary to avoid passing a catastrophic "tipping point" beyond which the climate will not recover. It describes itself as "an international campaign dedicated to building a movement to unite the world around solutions to the climate crisis – the solutions that science and justice demand. Our mission is to inspire the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis – to create a new sense of urgency and of possibility for our planet." They scored a major victory last week when President Obama announced that he was deferring a decision on the 1,770-mile long Excel pipeline that would have carried tar sands oil from Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico across the Oglala aquifer that waters much of the Midwest.

Friends of the Earth International (FOEI) – <http://www.foei.org/> -- "We are the world's largest grassroots environmental network, uniting 76 national member groups and some 5,000 local activist groups on every continent. With over 2 million members and supporters around the world, we campaign on today's most urgent environmental and social issues. We challenge the current model of economic and corporate globalization, and promote solutions that will help to create environmentally sustainable and socially just societies." At forty years old, FOEI is the climate justice movement's main NGO network, chaired by Nigerian activist and poet Nnimmo Bassey, and was prominent in pressing for a stringent treaty in Copenhagen (Doherty 2006).

Finally, we will test a new theory about how deep social change – defined as "a significant transformation of a society in the direction of greater economic equality and political participation" – results from the interaction between social movements and modern nation-states. My hypothesis here is that "Deep social change can come as a result of both *electing* popular governments (however grand or local in scope), and *forging social movements* to push them from below and alongside to make good on the vision of their promises."

Our choice of national cases of this interaction between movements and governments include two signatories of the Kyoto Protocol in which progressive movements have gained political power, and injected tougher targets into the international negotiations – Bolivia and the Maldives, both of which at Copenhagen demanded a treaty binding the global community to a rise in temperature of less than 1.5 degrees C. Two of the most recalcitrant national cases – the United States and Canada – which have shown little inclination or will to reduce their emissions in practice, despite the presence of active domestic climate movements. Two more cases are chosen because they lie somewhere in between and possess either a very strong climate justice movement (England), or a very ecologically-minded governing coalition (Iceland). We have recently decided to include South Africa – the continent's biggest economy, with enormous environmental problems, and a very strong climate justice movement, and Brazil, Latin America's largest economy, with powerful social movements that are starting to engage with climate change and the contradictions between economic development and sustainability.

This part of the study will allow us to assess the impact of local, national, and global climate justice movements on the negotiating positions of a variety of key actors in the global negotiations over a climate treaty.

Conclusions

What happens in the next few years will determine what future is possible for life on an Earth in crisis.

We hope that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of climate change movements and provide the most comprehensive available account of their efforts to bring the governments of the world closer toward a treaty based on economic, social, and ecological sustainability. Ours is a study of what could become one of history's greatest social movements as it unfolds in the coming decade.